

Buffalo Bayou

An Echo of Houston's Wilderness Beginnings

by
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The Gable Street Electric Station

Tucked away on a forgotten corner of Buffalo Bayou, the ghostly structure of the Gable Street Power Plant sits in quiet retirement. Once the throbbing electrical pulse of Houston, the plant has been decommissioned for over two decades. Yet, for over fifty years, this one facility provided a large percentage of the electricity that the city could consume.



The Gable Street plant as seen from Buffalo Bayou today.

Although the story of electric power in Houston begins in the early 1880's at a time when candles and gas lights were much more common than electric lights, the story of the ten acres of land on which the plant sits takes us back to the earliest days of the Town of Houston.

In the aftermath of the Battle of San Jacinto, the Texas Army was disbanded over the period from May through the summer of 1836. Many of the young men who enlisted or who were recruited to come join the fight for Texas found themselves on the prairie of southeast Texas without land or homes. But, their future was promising. The rumors that Augustus C. Allen was planning to establish a new town in the area were widespread among those who remained. Allen

was meeting with the Harris family near the ruins of Harrisburg and he also was communicating with William T. Austin in Columbia in an attempt to secure land for the new town.

A. C. and his brother John K. Allen announced the founding of their town of Houston in August, 1836, and the new Congress voted to establish the seat of government of the Republic of Texas in Houston on November 30, 1836. The construction of homes and government buildings began in early 1837, and President Sam Houston wrote that, when he arrived in late April, 1837, there were about one hundred houses already built and approximately 1500 people were engaged in various pursuits around town.

Many veterans came to the area to become a part of the new venture. They settled in and around the new town on Buffalo Bayou, and, it is highly possible that some of them had already been living in the area since the summer of 1836. Although the Allen brothers focused their attention on the sale of town lots, they also were willing to sell some tracts of land outside of the town limits. On April 13, 1837, two veterans of San Jacinto, William F. Hodge and Jonathan B. Frost, bought adjacent tracts of land along Buffalo Bayou downstream of town at \$100 per acre. The deeds indicated that each man already had a residence on his tract at the time of the purchase.

William F. Hodge acquired ten acres of land that encompassed the south bank of Buffalo Bayou from the the first bend of the bayou downstream of Houston to a point that is approximately at the modern McKee Street bridge, then down a line that now parallels McKee Street to a point parallel to the origin, and then back to the beginning.

After the death of his thirty-two year old neighbor Jonathan Frost of congestive fever in September, 1837, Hodge was involved in the probate of the Frost estate. Hodge held the security bond for Samuel M. Frost who was appointed the administrator of Jonathan Frost's estate. The death of his friend and neighbor and Samuel Frost's intention to subdivide the Frost tract and sell lots may have motivated Hodge to pursue his opportunities elsewhere. While Samuel Frost acquired title to the Frost tract from his brother James Frost on May 5, 1838, William Hodge completed the sale of his land to fellow veteran John Beldin on May 8, 1838. Taking advantage of the rising value of land near the capitol, Hodge sold his land to Beldin for \$3,000, reaping a \$2,000 gain on the sale.

John Beldin was a more recognized veteran than either Hodge or Frost. Born in New York in 1812, Beldin enlisted in Captain William J. Cook's "New Orleans Greys" in October, 1835 and fought at the Storming and Capture of Bexar in December of that year. The twenty-three year old soldier sustained the loss of an eye while "spiking a cannon" and he was mustered out of the Texas Army in January, 1836 after convalescing in New Orleans. Yet, Beldin returned to Texas to join Amasa Turner's Company B at San Jacinto.

For his service to Texas, John Beldin received various grants of land. For his service in the Army in 1835, he received a certificate for 320 acres of land. It is said that he traded that certificate for a three year old grey mare. On December 18, 1837, he was granted a league of land in compensation for his permanent disability while serving in the Army. He later sold the certificate for that land to Bucknam Canfield for \$200 on July 10, 1840. On January 5, 1838, Beldin was issued a Headright Certificate for one third of a league of land. On October 25, 1838, Beldin was

issues a Donation Certificate for 640 acres for his participation at San Jacinto. This tract, surveyed near Brays Bayou, is now part of the City of Bellaire along Loop 610, a tract approximately bounded by Bellaire Boulevard on the north, South Rice Avenue on the west, Beechnut Street on the south and the Southern Pacific Railroad on the east.

Like many of the veterans who had been paid for their military service in land certificates, John Beldin instantly became a land speculator, whether it was his intention or not. It was probably while in this frame of mind that he purchased the Hodge land in 1838. Although he married Frances Bartlett on October 23, 1839, it is not likely that he planned to settle on the land he acquired from William Hodge. Within a year, on September 11, 1840, John Beldin sold the ten acres he bought from Hodge to Leonard S. Perkins and Levi Butler. As fate would have it, a year later, John Beldin, though still a young man, was struck down by one of the series of epidemics that were the scourge of Houston during the mid-1800's. He died of "congestive fever" in Houston on September 15, 1841 and was buried in the City Cemetery.

The partnership of Perkins, then 31 years old, and Butler did not exploit the ten acres tract in the way that was being done with the Frost tract and the adjacent Moody tract. While the neighboring land was subdivided into small home lots and sold to individuals, the Hodge tract remained undeveloped for over a decade. At some point during that time, Levi Butler obtained complete control of the land and, on June 1, 1853, Butler sold the entire property to a partnership of Peter Gabel and Henry Schulte.

The language of the property description used in the deed to Gabel and Schulte provides us with one of the earliest associations of this tract with the neighborhood in Houston that became known as Frost Town. "...Ten acres of land on the south side of Buffalo Bayou in the lower part of the City of Houston and part of what is called Frost Town..." The apparent success of Samuel Frost's sale of lots in the Frost Town Subdivision also attracted residents to the adjoining blocks of the Moody Addition and the Second Ward. A community developed and it encompassed an area larger than the eight blocks of the Frost's tract.

A year and a half later, on December 12, 1854, Henry Schulte deeded his one half interest in the property to Peter Gabel. Schulte, about ten years younger than Gabel, was a brewer who immigrated from Prussia. After they dissolved their partnership in this tract of land, both men established successful breweries in downtown Houston.

Peter Gabel, in his early 30's at the time, arrived with his wife Mary in Houston in the late 1840's from Bavaria. By profession, he was a cooper, that is, a barrel maker, and he listed that as his occupation in the census of 1850. Shortly thereafter, however, Gabel began brewing beer. And, by 1857, his brewery had more than doubled in volume. Gabel became well established in the community and was a successful brewer, distiller and wine dealer. By 1866, he owned a brewery on the corner of Preston Avenue and Caroline Street and the Exchange Bar Room on Franklin Avenue, between Main Street and Travis Street.

From the time of his arrival in Houston, Peter Gabel showed a gregarious and socially active side of his personality. In January, 1854, Gabel hosted a meeting at his home on Preston Avenue in which ten young German men founded a club called the Houston Turnverein. As a social

organization dedicated to intellectual and athletic activities, the Turnverein became a popular civic organization among the local German community, eventually reaching a membership of over 1400 men. It was out of this group of men that the city's first fire-fighting company was established. Since many of these German men lived in the Frost Town area and the Second Ward, some historians have attributed the first fire-fighting company to Frost Town, whether that is wholly accurate, or not.

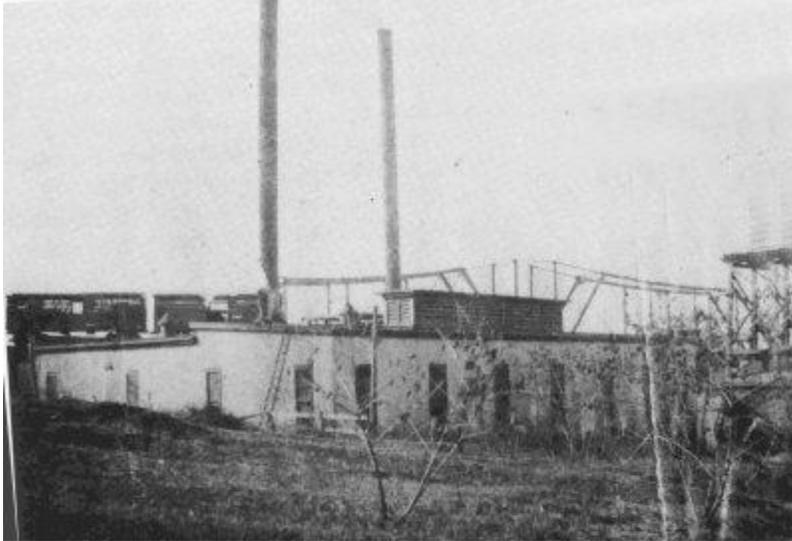
Peter Gabel himself probably never lived in Frost Town or on the tract of land along Buffalo Bayou. However, as a consequence of his long ownership of the property that had originally belonged to William Hodge, Gabel put his own stamp on the land. It became commonly known as the Gabel property, and the street along its eastern boundary became Gabel Street, with the spelling later Anglicized to "Gable" in almost all instances.

Unlike the Frost Town Subdivision across the street, the development of homes and businesses on the Gabel property proceeded slowly although the Galveston and Houston Junction Railroad was built across the middle of the tract in 1865. By 1869, there were two houses on lots on the south half and a few scattered buildings in the north section of the tract. By 1873, there were three houses along Gabel Street and a couple outlying barn-like structures in the north section. The most significant and enduring development to the Gabel tract was to be the construction of the Citizens Electric Company Power Plant in 1890.

Gas lights were introduced in Houston shortly after the Civil War and were in widespread use in businesses and homes by 1880. The inventions by Thomas A. Edison in the late 1870's with the new source of energy of electricity were about to change the lives of Americans and Houstonians in particular. Edison's improvements to the incandescent light bulb and his development of an electric power distribution system led to the installation of the country's first incandescent light and power station for private consumers in New York City in 1882.

Within the summer of the same year, Emmanuel Raphael obtained a franchise to build a plant utilizing Edison's concept of generating electrical current by means of a central dynamo, then distributing it in small quantities to thousands of homes and commercial buildings. Raphael received a charter for the Houston Electric Light and Power Company on May 20, 1882, and the company constructed its plant on Buffalo Bayou at the foot of Main Street near Commerce Avenue. Today, the site is a parking lot for the Spaghetti Warehouse Restaurant.

The difficulties of introducing a new technology to society and making it an economical and profitable business are monumental. The Houston Electric Light and Power Company had technical problems resulting in chronic low load conditions and financial problems caused by an inadequate rate structure. The company went into receivership in March, 1886 and was acquired by its rival, the Houston Gas Light Company, in 1887.



The Citizens Electric plant, circa 1889. Note the GH&H Railroad bridge in the background and the water tank on the right.

(From: Beck, Bill. At your service: an illustrated history of Houston Lighting & Power Company. Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1990.)

Sensing that there was still an opportunity in the Houston marketplace, investors chartered the Citizens' Electric Light and Power Company on July 29, 1889, and then purchased the franchise and the equipment of the Fort Wayne Jenny Electric Company. Citizens' Electric built its plant on Gabel Street, just north of the Galveston Houston and Henderson Railroad tracks. A rail siding provided access for coal to be piled on the south side of the coal fired plant which had two smoke stacks. A thirty-five foot tall, wooden water tower was located off the northwest corner of the facility.

The plant itself, a wooden structure that was sheathed in corrugated iron and covered with a tin roof, housed fifteen dynamos to provide electrical power. The power plant operated continuously, and, at any one time, the plant's seven horizontal tubular boilers and three engines, with a capacity of 720 horsepower, were driving ten arc dynamos which enabled the three bipolar power generators to produce a total capacity of 150 kilowatts.

Rather than compete for the electrical power market in Houston, the Houston Gas Light Company sold its interest in the Houston Electric Light and Power Company that it had acquired when the company went into receivership to Citizens' Electric in January, 1891. Citizens' Electric became the sole electric power provider for Houston.

Financial difficulties plagued the Citizens' Electric Light & Power Company and the company went into receivership on January 7, 1898. The fortunes of the company suffered another blow a few weeks later. In the early evening of March 26, 1898, the No. 6 boiler at Citizens' Electric Gabel Street plant exploded. The force of the explosion toppled one of the smoke stacks causing it to break in two and fall across the GH&H trestle. The plant was destroyed and two men working at the plant died instantly. Another two men died within a week, and, miraculously two workmen survived.

The devastation of the power plant was compounded by a fire that was touched off the next day. A spark ignited the vapors in and around the facility, and hundreds of gallons of oil and solvents went up in flames. Fortunately, it does not appear that any of the ten homes that are depicted along the west side of Gabel Street in the 1891 "bird's eye" map were damaged by the explosion or fire.

The company struggled to survive the repercussions of the disaster. A new plant, constructed on

the south side of the GH&H tracks to replace the Gabel Street plant destroyed by explosion, began operation in April, 1900. Never the less, in December, 1901, the court ordered the transfer of the Citizens' Electric assets to its creditors who reorganized the company as the Houston Lighting and Power Company.

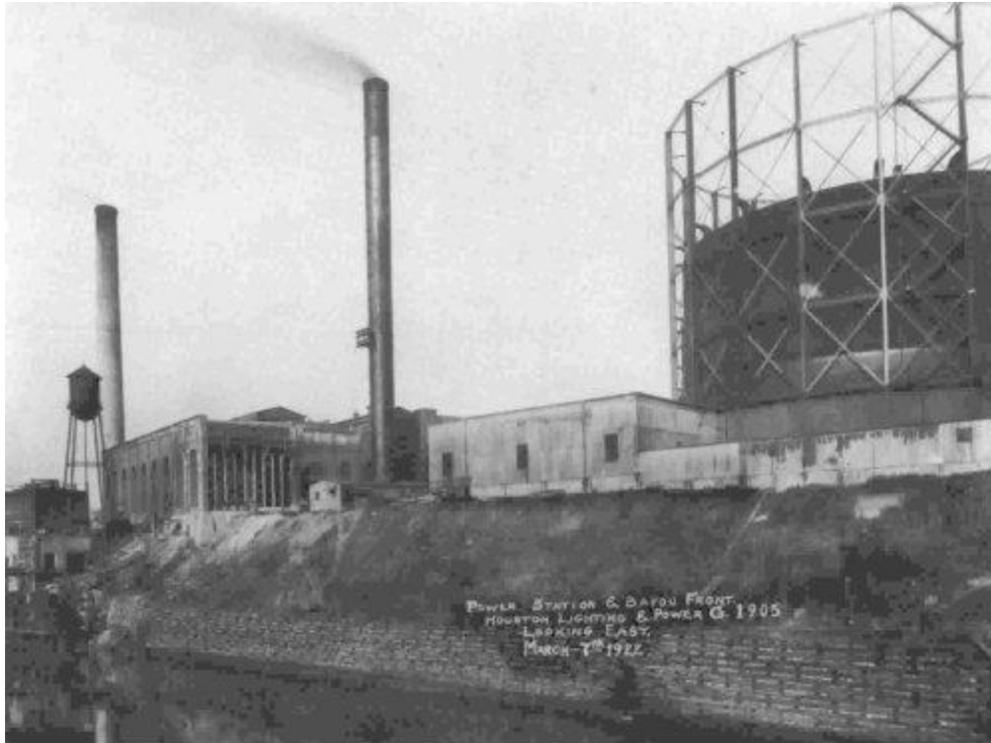
The revitalized company made a commitment in 1905 to enhance the plant on Gabel Street with enough generating capacity to provide electricity to all the citizens of the city. By 1907, the plant consisted of an engine and dynamo room in the largest building, an adjacent office on the northeast corner of the structure, oil tanks off the northwest corner of the building, and other outlying buildings for storage.



The Gable Street plant, 1914.

(From: Beck, Bill. At your service: an illustrated history of Houston Lighting & Power Company. Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1990.)

In spite of the increase in industrial development in the area, the Gabel tract, by 1907, continued to have considerable residential development, as did the rest of Frost Town. Seventeen lots with dwellings lined the Gabel Street side of the south half of the tract and extended along the southern boundary as well. Nine lots with dwellings were on the north side of the tract lining the railroad tracks and extending northward along Gabel Street (which by this time is spelled "Gable"). A steel bridge across Buffalo Bayou at McKee Street connected Gable Street and Frost Town with the rail yards and commercial businesses on the north side of the bayou.



The Gable Street plant, looking from the bayou, 1922.

(From: Beck, Bill. At your service: an illustrated history of Houston Lighting & Power Company. Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1990.)

the capacity took place at repeated intervals prior to the Depression with additions made to the facility in 1913, 1917, 1918 and 1921. However, by 1922, the Gable Street plant was considered inefficient since Buffalo Bayou was a shallow, narrow stream with minimal tidal action which resulted in circulating water temperatures in the cooling system that did not allow the generators to operate economically.

Although the major reconstruction of the power plant had been completed by 1924, the plant was unable to provide service to the whole Houston area. In August, 1924, the first unit of Houston Lighting and Power's Deepwater plant in Pasadena went online to share the load.

The physical plant and facilities at Gable Street, by 1924, began to take on the appearance of a modern industrial site. The area south of the railroad tracks, the south half of the Gabel tract, was almost completely occupied by the electric company facilities. The plant's main building contained the engine and dynamo room. Off to the northwest corner of the building there was a steel water tank on the ground, next to two oil tanks in underground concrete vaults. A water tank on a fifty foot tower stood adjacent to the west side of the main building, near the north corner.

The electric utility attempted to keep up with the demand for electrical power service in Houston for the first quarter of the twentieth century. Industrialization of the local economy, the influx of population and the introduction of consumer appliances meant that the demand for electricity continued to rise in Houston. Construction on the Gable Street plant to improve

Various outbuildings to the south of the main building included a supply warehouse, a bath house and general storage. The Houston Gas and Fuel Company had constructed a steel gasometer tank on Gable Street, south of the plant, where gas was stored near at normal pressure and temperature. The Settlement House, the former Settegast home, which had been moved to the far southern



Construction in 1924, a view from Gable Street.

(From: Beck, Bill. At your service: an illustrated history of Houston Lighting & Power Company. Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1990.)

boundary of the Gabel property prior to the construction of the new Rusk School in 1912, seemed dangerously close to the volatile fuels and solvents of the plant.

In a similar pattern that mixed industrial fuel storage in close proximity to homes and residences, two large, steel oil storage tanks were located on the ground in the area north of the railroad tracks and adjacent to the homes along Kapner Street.

The residential development in the north half of the Gabel tract continued from 1907 to 1924. Isaac Kapner, a Polish immigrant from Austria, began buying properties in the Frost Town area about 1900 and by 1924, he had subdivided a large part of the part of the tract north of the railroad tracks into lots and small dwellings, most likely rental properties.

Kapner and his wife Sophia, both in their early twenties, had come to the United States about 1880 and lived for about five years in Arkansas before coming to Texas in 1885 or 1886. Kapner, who listed his occupation as a merchant, lived in 1900 on the south side of Lyle Street in the Moody Addition, next to the GH&H Railroad tracks. He knew the neighborhood and the potential for providing low cost housing for the steady flow of immigrants to the city. In addition to the houses that existed in 1907, twenty-one new homes lined Kapner Street that branched west off Gable Street, north of Race Street.

Kapner continued to live in the area, and in 1920, he and his wife Sophia lived at 1902 Franklin Avenue, at the corner with Hamilton Street. By this time, at age 63, he considered himself retired. Sophia passed away in 1921, and by 1930, Isaac Kapner had remarried and lived with his wife Augusta, a German immigrant, at 1405 McGowen Street. Kapner died in 1945 at age 88 and his son Charles filed his will for probate on October 8, 1945.

Additional construction and development of the Houston Lighting and Power Gable Street Plant occurred in 1939. And, by 1951, the main plant consisted of the boiler room, the engine room, the dynamo room and associated facilities. A separate oil pump house adjacent to Gable Street was built in 1950.

The complex extended across both sides of the GH&H tracks. The residential area along Kapner Street was removed and no houses remained on the north side of the railroad tracks by 1951. Instead, the HL&P facilities there include two cooling tower units, an oil storage facility with two tanks, a tile locker house on the south bank of the bayou, and other small buildings.

Security concerns related to the declaration of war with Germany prompted HL&P to erect a fence around the Gable Street plant. In particular, the fence separated the plant yard from the Settlement House on the far southern boundary of the property. The Settlement House was eventually razed in the mid-1950's for the construction of the Elysian Viaduct.

The Gable Street plant was finally decommissioned in 1983 as other, more efficient energy generation facilities became operational. The property has not, however, been abandoned. Recent additions and improvements to the electrical substation on the north part of the tract to provide service to the development of the east side of downtown.

In 1993, the Gable Street Power Plant was considered for the site of a proposed energy museum, but that idea has yet to mature.

The hull of the once prominent electrical generating facility stands remote and mysterious to passers-by on McKee Street, the new name of Gable Street. Seen from the bayou, the plant looks much as it did when it was functioning. Yet, the dock and bulkhead structures at water level along the bank are in disrepair. Large ceramic pipes of the cooling system lie in place among the scaffolds although many of the segments are broken and disconnected. Below the mowed lawn on the top of the bank, bayou vegetation and the indigenous undergrowth hides much of the



Ceramic pipes circulated bayou water to the cooling towers.

former wharf structures that remind us of the time when boats and barges plied the waters of Buffalo Bayou this far into town.